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The Boss, The Beauty And The Bargain

Judith McWilliams



Vintage 90s

Judith McWilliams

**The Boss, The Beauty  
And The Bargain**

«HarperCollins»

**McWilliams J.**

The Boss, The Beauty And The Bargain / J. McWilliams —  
«HarperCollins»,

THE FORTY-EIGHT-HOUR-FIANCE... When Livvy Farrell asked her boss to masquerade as her fiancée for the weekend, Conal Sutherland was more than willing to further employee relations. He'd long been envisioning schemes that moved Livvy from her desk and into his bed. Now Conal could kiss the black-haired beauty to his heart's content and, well, there really was nothing engaged couples didn't do. Sounded like a no-risk arrangement to this shrewd bachelor, who'd rather think about mergers and markets than the forbidden "M" word. By Monday morning, this disheveled and thoroughly distracted man knew otherwise. Uh-oh. And now his highly enterprising employee had another proposal for him... .

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“If You Pretend To Be My Fiancé For The Weekend, I’ll Do Your Presentation.”

Conal Sutherland’s eyes widened, as what she was saying finally registered. Livvy Farrell wanted him to spend the weekend pretending to be her fiancé. He would be able to kiss her and touch her to his heart’s content, and if she objected, he could say that he was merely adding authenticity to his act. He’d long been thinking of ways to get her into bed, and now this gift from heaven had fallen into his lap. It seemed too good to be true, and that worried him.

“How am I supposed to behave?” he asked cautiously.

“Just be yourself.”

“It’s a deal.” Conal fought to keep the triumph out of his voice.

“I didn’t tell Mom that we were engaged, just that I was considering it,” Livvy hurriedly corrected.

“Engaged is better. It gives us more leeway.”

Dear Reader,

Hello! For the past few months I’m sure you’ve noticed the new (but probably familiar) name at the bottom of this letter. I was previously the senior editor of the Silhouette Romance line, and now, as senior editor of Silhouette Desire, I’m thrilled to bring you six sensuous, deeply emotional Silhouette Desire novels every month by some of the bestselling—and most beloved—authors in the genre.

January begins with *The Cowboy Steals a Lady*. January’s MAN OF THE MONTH title and the latest book in bestselling author Anne McAllister’s CODE OF THE WEST series. You should see the look on Shane Nichols’s handsome face when he realizes he’s stolen the wrong woman...especially when she doesn’t mind being stolen or trapped with Mr. January one bit...

*Wife for a Night* by Carol Grace is a sexy tale of a woman who’d been too young for her handsome groom-to-be years ago, but is all grown up now.... And in Raye Morgan’s *The Hand-Picked Bride*, what’s a man to do when he craves the lady he’d hand-picked to be his brother’s bride?

Plus, we have *Tall, Dark and Temporary* by Susan Connell, the latest in THE GIRLS MOST LIKELY TO... miniseries; *The Love Twin* by ultrasensuous writer Patty Salier and Judith McWilliams’s *The Boss, the Beauty and the Bargain*. All as irresistible as they sound!

I hope you enjoy January’s selections, and here’s to a very happy New Year (with promises of many more Silhouette Desire novels you won’t want to miss)!

Regards,



Melissa Senate

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, OnL L2A 5X3

*The Boss, The Beauty And The Bargain*

Judith McWilliams



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JUDITH McWILLIAMS

began to enjoy romances while in search of the proverbial “happily ever afters.” But she always found herself rewriting the endings, and eventually the beginnings, of the books she read. Her husband finally suggested that she write novels of her own, and she’s been doing so ever since. An ex-teacher with four children, Judith has traveled the country extensively with her husband and has been greatly influenced by those experiences. But while not tending the garden or caring for family, Judith does what she enjoys most—writing. She has also written under the name Charlotte Hines.

One

“Where have you been? It’s two o’clock!”

Livvy Farrell pushed a damp strand of her black hair off her forehead and slipped out of her dripping raincoat, hanging it on the coatrack by the office door.

“You said you’d be back by one, and you were out in that downpour,” Shawna accused.

Livvy grinned, her bright blue eyes brimming with laughter. “Ah, the ever-vigilant secretary. Nothing gets by you. Tell me, do I really want to know why you’ve developed a sudden interest in my whereabouts?”

“Probably not,” Shawna said candidly. “This place has been like a zoo since you left. Your mother’s phoned four times—and she sounds more desperate each time—that client with the building supply company has called you several times and the boss,” Shawna nodded toward the oak door across from the reception room, “has been asking for you every five minutes.” She grimaced. “I swear the man thinks I’ve got you locked in a closet somewhere.”

“Conal wants me?” Livvy felt a liquid warmth ooze through her at the thought of Conal Sutherland looking for her. Or better yet, of him finding her. Her finely drawn features unconsciously softened. He’d sweep her up in his powerful arms and crush her to his broad chest. Her internal temperature went up a few tenths of a degree just imagining what it would feel like to be pressed up against him.

It would feel fantastic, Livvy decided, absolutely fantastic. His dark brown eyes would gleam with suppressed passion, and he would murmur that he’d suddenly realized that he’d been looking for her all his life. That he couldn’t wait to—

“Are you coming down with something?” Shawna demanded impatiently.

No, but I’d sure like to, Livvy thought ruefully. Conal, to be specific. I’d like to pull him down into my bed and make mad, passionate love to him.

Livvy made a determined effort to get her wayward imagination under control. She most emphatically didn’t want Shawna to get the idea that she harbored any thoughts other than professional ones for Conal. The situation in their small office would become unbearable if Shawna were to decide to try to play matchmaker. Even worse, Conal might think that she’d put Shawna up to it. The appalling thought effectively squashed her ardor.

“What did Conal want?” Livvy asked.

Shawna shrugged. “I don’t know. Neither of you ever tell me anything. Shall I let him know you’re back?”



Livvy determinedly resisted the temptation. “No, first I’d better find out what’s bothering my mother. Would you get her on the phone for me?”

Livvy went into her office, poured herself the last of the coffee in the pot and wearily sank into the brown leather chair behind her cluttered desk. She took a reviving sip of the concentrated caffeine and tried to wiggle the tension out of her shoulders caused by spending her lunch hour competing with other equally harried shoppers.

When the phone rang, she put the coffee cup down on one of the reasonably level piles of paper and answered it.

“Livvy, the most awful thing has happened!” Her mother didn’t even bother with a perfunctory hello. “The restaurant I hired to cater the food for your grandparents’ fiftieth anniversary party had a kitchen fire and is out of business for the foreseeable future!” Marie’s voice rose to a wail. “What am I going to do?”

“Calm down for starters,” Livvy automatically slipped into her soothing-the-nervous-client mode. “I will admit it’s aggravating, but—”

“‘Aggravating’!” Marie squawked.

“Very aggravating,” Livvy amended, “but it’s nothing that can’t be overcome.”

“Every other caterer in Scranton is already booked for the weekend. And your Aunt Rose wasn’t the least bit of help. She just kept saying that because I was the oldest, I ought to do it.”

“Mmm,” Livvy murmured, realizing that her mother didn’t want advice, she wanted sympathy. Something Livvy was more than willing to provide. After all, her mother really did have a right to gripe about the way her sisters had dumped the organizing of their parents’ anniversary reunion entirely on her shoulders. Although if it were left up to her scatterbrained aunt Rose, the whole family would sit down to peanut butter sandwiches. Her grandparents deserved better than that. They merited the very best their family could arrange, Livvy thought on a wave of love.

“And the trouble I had finding a baker who was willing to copy the wedding cake Mom and Dad had. No one wants to tackle anything the least bit out of the ordinary these days,” Marie said, continuing her litany of woes. “The only thing I can think to do at this point is to have everyone pitch in and bring food. There are far too many people coming for one person to make everything.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Livvy responded, wondering what it would be like to have been married for that long. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she tried to imagine Conal as her husband of fifty years. She couldn’t because her mind was too busy envisioning him as a bridegroom. His dark brown hair would have a thin coating of silvery confetti from the wedding party, and his eyes would be aglow with passion. He would—Her imagination faltered under the strain of trying to picture Conal saying, “I do.” Not when he’d already been so vocal about the fact that he wouldn’t.

Livvy stifled a sigh. The only place Conal was likely to be a bridegroom was in her dreams.

“But I do have good news, too.”

Livvy’s finely honed sense of self-preservation kicked in at the nervous tremor in her mother’s voice.

“What’s that?” Livvy asked cautiously.

“I was talking to Teresa next door who said that her husband’s second cousin’s son is staying with them, and he doesn’t have anything planned for this weekend.”

“So?”

Marie gave a long suffering sigh as if she despaired of her daughter’s intelligence and said, “This weekend is your grandparents’ party.”

“I know that. I just spent my entire lunch hour and another hour besides finding the perfect gift for them.”

“It means that he can be your date for the weekend.” Marie refused to be sidetracked.

“No,” Livvy said flatly.

“He’s willing to do it,” Marie assured her. “Teresa asked him, and he said he didn’t have anything better to do.”

“He may be willing, but I’m not,” Livvy said, having had far too many visits home ruined by Marie’s unquenchable desire to see her youngest daughter married off.

“But, Livvy, if you don’t do it, I’ll have to listen to your grandma lecture me about what a disgrace it is that you’re almost thirty and still not married. And if your aunt May makes one more crack about how sad it is that with all the millions of men in New York City, not one of them is willing to marry you...” Marie’s voice trembled.

Livvy bit back an acid rejoinder about what her aunt May could do with her pseudo sympathy. She didn’t care what the family thought about her single state, but she knew her mother did. Marie cared very much.

“Mom, I really—”

“It’s just for the weekend,” Marie said hurriedly. “And Teresa says that he’s really a nice boy. He just fell in with bad company and—”

Boy? Bad company? Livvy shuddered. It seemed that the closer she got to thirty the less exacting Marie’s requirements in a prospective son-in-law were becoming, but it really sounded as if this one had been dredged up from the bottom of the barrel, literally.

“No,” Livvy said, breaking into Marie’s obviously rehearsed recitation. “Absolutely not.”

To Livvy’s horror, her mother burst into tears. “It’s just for the weekend,” Marie sobbed. “What’s one weekend, and it’ll at least prove to everyone that you can get a date. Please, dear, do it for me?”

“I can’t because...because I’ve already asked someone home for the party.” Livvy blurted out the first excuse that came to mind.

“What?” Marie’s tears miraculously disappeared. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“Because he hasn’t accepted yet,” Livvy improvised. “He said he’d let me know if he can clear his calendar.”

“He sounds very important,” Marie said approvingly. “I can’t believe that after years of my telling you to grab one of those executives in New York, you’ve actually done it. What does he do, dear?”

“He’s in advertising like me,” Livvy mumbled.

“But what if he can’t come?” Marie worried. “Maybe we ought to hold the one I found in reserve just in case.”

“No!”

“But—”

“I can’t date anyone else, Mom.” Livvy groped for a reason that sounded plausible. She could hardly tell her mother that she felt disloyal dating other men because she was fixated on a man who viewed marriage as a specialized form of indentured servitude. Somehow it seemed the final irony that after avoiding marriage for years while she got her career firmly launched, she had finally fallen in love with, and wanted to marry, a man who seemed to want no part of the institution. From various comments he’d made, it was clear Conal didn’t intend to let any woman occupy a meaningful role in his life.

Deciding that if she were going to take up lying, she might as well go for the big time, Livvy closed her eyes and announced, “He’s asked me to marry him, and I haven’t decided whether I want to or not.”

“Marry!”

Livvy winced at the ecstatic sound in Marie’s voice. Her mother hadn’t sounded that happy since her sister Fern had given birth to her only grandchild. Her mother was going to be very let down when Livvy arrived for the party by herself and told her that she’d refused her imaginary suitor.

“Listen, Mom, I’ve got to run. I’ve got a million and one things that need to be done.”

“Of course, dear. I can hardly wait to meet your Prince Charming.”

“Prince Charming doesn’t exist. He’s just a man. Bye.” Livvy hurriedly hung up before Marie asked any more questions, such as the name of her mythical suitor.

Livvy took another sip of the tepid coffee, feeling like an ungrateful daughter. But a determined, ungrateful daughter. Not even to please her mother was she willing to spend the weekend trying to fend off the neighbor’s husband’s second cousin’s boy. Who had “just fallen in with bad company.” Livvy shuddered. Besides, with any luck at all Marie would be so busy with all the visiting relatives that she wouldn’t have time to focus too much on Livvy’s failure to produce a fiancé.

The sudden ringing of the phone startled her, and Livvy jumped, spilling coffee down the front of her cream silk blouse. She frowned at the dark, spreading patch in exasperation. That was all the afternoon needed to complete it. A stain on her brand-new blouse.

The phone rang again, and Livvy picked it up. She identified herself and then wished she hadn’t when she recognized the voice of Walt Larson, a client who had hired their advertising agency to design a campaign to promote his building supply company.

“You were wrong, Miss Farrell,” Larson announced gleefully.

Firmly walling her annoyance behind the practical demands of keeping the customer happy, Livvy forced a laugh. “It would hardly be the first time, Mr. Larson. But what exactly are you referring to?”

“I checked, and it isn’t against the law to have a bigbreasted woman in a tiny bikini in a television ad.”

“It’s against the law of good taste!” Livvy’s resolve slipped slightly. “Mr. Larson, you sell building supplies for the do-it-yourselfer. What do scantily clad women have to do with that?”

“Sex sells!” he insisted. “You’re supposed to be the advertising expert. You should know that.”

Livvy gritted her teeth, counted to ten and then said, “That is a gross oversimplification.”

“Now you listen to me, Miss Farrell...” Livvy turned at the sound of a sharp knock on her door. Before she could respond, it was pushed open. Larson’s hectoring voice faded to a minor annoyance in the background, as Conal’s large body filled her vision. Eagerly her eyes skimmed over his face. His dark eyes gleamed with suppressed excitement, sending a wave of anticipation through her.

Her eyes instinctively sought the intriguing line of his mouth, lingering over the firmness of his lips. She didn’t know what had excited him, but she sure knew what would work for her—if he were to gather her in his arms and press his lips to hers. A shiver raced over her skin, raising goosebumps.

“...pay the bills!” Larson’s indignant tone finally registered in Livvy’s bemused mind.

“Yes, Mr. Larson, but...” Her concentration suffered a major setback when Conal perched on the edge of her desk, and Larson launched back into his tirade. She could feel the warmth from his large body reaching out to her. Luring her closer to him.

In self-defense she dropped her eyes and found herself staring at his thigh. His muscles were pushing against the thin gray material of his suit pants, and Livvy felt her fingers tremble with the urge to touch him. To probe the strength of his muscles and find out if they were as hard as they looked. To—

“...big boobs,” Larson concluded.

“Boobs!” Livvy jerked up, outrage momentarily dousing her fascination with Conal’s body.

“Breasts,” Conal amended in a stage whisper.

Livvy ignored him, even if she couldn’t entirely ignore the tightening of her own breasts at the gleam of mischief in Conal’s eyes. Clients might be important, but there were limits to what she was willing to do to keep an account. Larson was skating seriously close to that limit.

Livvy’s eyes narrowed as an idea suddenly occurred to her.

“Mr. Larson, I will concede that you have a point that sex sells, but you’re being very unimaginative about it. Instead of a bikini-clad woman, why don’t we hire a model from one of the male strip clubs?”



“What?” Larson sounded confused.

“It’ll be great,” Livvy said blandly. “We can get a muscular type in a sequined jockstrap and—”

“You can’t do that!” Mr. Larson sputtered.

“Why not?” Livvy felt the trembling of Conal’s body, and she looked up to see him choking on the laughter he was trying to contain. Conal would be a natural in the role, she thought dreamily. They could put him in a redsequined bit of nothing and drape him over a power saw. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She would buy. And so would half the women in New York City.

“I don’t think you appreciate my business,” Larson blustered. “I’ve half a mind to take it elsewhere.”

Half a mind about summed it up, Livvy thought acidly. “We would be very sorry to loose your business,” she lied, “but of course you must do what you think best.”

She gently hung up the phone in contrast to the way Larson slammed the receiver down.

“What was that all about?” Conal asked.

“Inappropriate sex,” Livvy muttered, not wanting to talk about Larson’s fixation with large-breasted women.

“Sex inappropriate? Is that possible in this culture?” Conal grinned at her, his white teeth gleaming darkly against his tanned face, and the laugh lines around his eyes deepening. When he smiled, he smiled with his whole face, Liwy realized. Would he make love with the same intensity? Would he—Stop it. Livvy hastily yanked her imagination up short. She absolutely had to get some kind of grip on her daydreams, because they were beginning to take over her mind every time she even thought about Conal. Somehow she had to find a way to dilute her fascination with him because time wasn’t doing it, as she’d hoped it would when she’d first met him eighteen months ago. Time only seemed to be deepening her attraction to him.

She took a deep, steadying breath and said, “Forget our probably ex-client and tell me what happened.”

Conal shifted uneasily. He momentarily couldn’t remember why he’d come into her office in the first place. He’d taken one look at the aggravation on her face, and had wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and wipe away every last vestige of strain. He wanted to kiss her until he managed to replace her annoyance with the mindless bliss of sexual desire. He stared down into the brilliant blue of her eyes, desperately wanting to see them grow cloudy with passion. Passion for him.

He clenched his teeth against the burgeoning need that shot through him like a pain. Fat chance he had of that, he thought grimly. He couldn’t even convince her to go out with him, let alone go to bed with him. Patience. He repeated what had become his mantra during the long months Livvy had worked for him. Sooner or later he was bound to find a chink in her armor. If he was ever to convince Livvy to see him as her lover, he absolutely couldn’t do anything to scare her off. As long as he remained on friendly terms with her, he would be in a position to take advantage of it. In the meantime he would tell her the good news.

“I got a phone call from Grandma Betty’s Soup Company.”

Livvy sat up in sudden interest. As far as she knew, it was the first time they’d been approached by a subsidiary of one of the large multinational chains.

“And?” Liwy prodded him.

“And they want us to submit a proposal for a new line of soup mixes they’re developing.” He offered the words like a gift.

“That’s fantastic!” Liwy enthused.

“It sure is. To paraphrase someone or other, this could be the start of something big.”

But not too big. Livvy instinctively rejected the thought of Conal expanding his small agency. She loved working closely with him and wouldn’t want to lose that intimacy.

“There’s just one thing,” Conal added slowly as he reached the part that he knew was going to be tricky.

“As long as it doesn’t involve bikinis, I can deal with it.”

“It’s the time element. From the deadline they set for our first presentation, I think they originally tried another ad agency and it didn’t work out.”

“How tight is the timing?”

“They want a presentation in six weeks.”

“Six weeks! It’s impossible. Have you forgotten my vacation starts Friday?”

“Take it later,” Conal suggested.

“This is later. I was supposed to go in August and had to postpone it when we had that rush job for the record chain. Besides, I’ve already made reservations in Extaca.” Livvy stiffened her resolve not to give in. She had deliberately planned her vacation in Mexico, hoping that being so far away from Conal would allow her to get her obsession under control. But even so, Conal was right. This really was a great opportunity. An opportunity she would normally have grabbed with both hands.

“You’re tense.” Conal watched the line between her eyebrows deepen in indecision. “That fool Larson has upset you. You have to learn to ignore people like him.”

“That comes under the heading of easier said than done.” Livvy made no attempt to correct his misapprehension. “I...”

Her thoughts scattered like dry leaves in a gale-force wind when Conal stepped behind her and placed his large hands on her shoulders. She could feel the weight of them pressing against her.

“Relax.” Conal’s deep voice was a soothing murmur that lapped seductively against her tense muscles. “Just blank out your mind and allow yourself to drift.” His fingers closed around the slim bones of her shoulders, and he rubbed his thumbs over her silk-clad skin.

Livvy instinctively took a deep breath, sucking in the provocative fragrance of his cologne. He smelled delicious. Like—She shivered as he suddenly slipped his fingers beneath her collar and massaged the base of her neck. A heavy weight seemed to be pulling her eyelids down. His touch felt so good. So right.

Feeling greatly daring, she leaned her head back against his chest. It felt hard. Intriguingly hard.

“There.” Conal’s voice sounded deeper than usual as he stepped back, and she wondered if it was a result of him touching her. Could he have found it exciting? It was a heady thought, even if she had her doubts about it.

Liwy watched as Conal began to pace. Not an easy thing to do in her small office. His face was set in hard lines, and there was a determined jut to his square jaw. A wave of tenderness at his purposeful expression shook her.

“Why don’t you do the proposal yourself?” she suggested. “You don’t really need me.” She ignored the quick flash of pain her words caused.

Conal shoved his long fingers through his short brown hair in frustration. “I can’t do it. They were very specific about wanting a light touch for the campaign. Along the lines of that whimsical thing you did for Ebbings Bakery. I simply don’t have your humorous flair.”

Despite her misgivings, Liwy was unable to resist the glow of pleasure his compliment gave her. They really did make a great team. They each had a skill the other lacked. Which was all the more reason not to ruin the ideal working relationship with a short-term personal one, she reminded herself. Because while an affair with Conal would be fantastic, it wouldn’t last. Relationships held together strictly by sex never did. And while she might love Conal with all her heart, he certainly didn’t love her. Eventually the pleasure of making love to her would become commonplace for Conal and he would end their affair, leaving a lot of memories and possible resentments between them that would be bound to interfere with a working relationship. She would have no choice but to leave. And then she would have nothing. Not Conal and not her job. Nothing but memories, and she was far too young to be living on memories.

“But I’ve already made reservations,” Livvy repeated doggedly, hoping she sounded more enthusiastic than she felt. The prospect of two weeks in Mexico paled next to the thought of spending the time working closely with Conal on the proposal.

“Cancel them. Think of the agency. Think of the future.”

I am, Livvy thought grimly. The future of my peace of mind. And the very faint hope that if she weren’t around for two weeks Conal might suddenly realize how much he missed her. Might begin to question his aversion to marriage.

“Think of the fact that I’ll owe you a favor,” he added.

A favor? Livvy stared into his gleaming eyes and felt her insides twist in sudden desire. She could think of several favors that she would like from him, starting with a long kiss and ending with her naked body wrapped in his arms. He would be—

Livvy blinked as she was suddenly struck with a blinding flash of inspiration. She sat up straighter as the idea began to gel in her mind.

She had told her mother that she was bringing home a date for the weekend. A man who had asked her to marry him. What if she were to ask Conal to pretend to be that man in exchange for her canceling her vacation and doing his soup proposal? Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Not only would it temporarily relieve the pressure of her mother’s constant nagging about finding a husband, but also, with Conal pretending to be her almost fiancé, the opportunity might well come up to kiss him. Or even make love to him. Her stomach twisted longingly at the thought. This could be her chance to explore her feelings for Conal without having to worry about repercussions, because Conal would think her every response was nothing more than an act. He wouldn’t realize how much it meant to her. Maybe if she were able to make love to him, she would realize that it wasn’t such a big deal. Maybe her fascination with him was nothing more than a variation of the “forbidden fruit” idea. Or maybe, if fortune were really smiling on her, Conal would like being engaged to her so much he would want to make it permanent.

Livvy swallowed a sigh, knowing the chances of that happening were almost nil. During that time she’d been working closely with him, his attitude toward marriage hadn’t softened one iota. Nor had she been able to find out why he was against it. It wasn’t as if he led a wild, swinging lifestyle that marriage could interfere with.

There was so much she didn’t know, when it came to Conal. A sense of discouragement weighed her down. If she had any common sense, she would quit. She would find another job and another man to love. Someone who wasn’t averse to commitment. Perhaps if she weren’t seeing Conal every day, other men would begin to look more interesting.

She placated her common sense, telling it later. She had time. She wasn’t even thirty yet. She could afford to indulge her dreams of Conal awhile yet, before she had to start worrying about her biological clock running down.

“A huge favor,” Conal upped the ante.

Livvy stared at him, torn between hope and fear of rejection. What did she have to lose by asking him? She tried to consider the situation logically. Since he didn’t know she had an emotional reason for wanting him to agree, she was no worse off than before if he said no.

But if he were to agree... She shivered beneath the sudden onslaught of sensation that blossomed in her chest. If he agreed, anything might happen.

“There is something you could do for me,” Livvy said slowly, trying to figure out the best way to say it. “This weekend is my grandparents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary, and my mother is organizing a family reunion for the event. All the relatives will be there.”

“I always wanted to belong to a big family when I was a kid.”

Livvy grimaced at his wistful tone. “Believe me, the reality leaves a lot to be desired...which brings me to my problem. While I dearly love my family, I don’t agree with the older members on a lot of issues, and one of them is about a woman’s place in the general scheme of things. They think

that a woman's first priority in life should be catching a husband, and her last should be keeping him happy. Careers are something men have."

"Thereby assuring herself of a meal ticket for life," he said.

"You obviously haven't seen the divorce statistics lately." This time Livvy tried challenging one of his derogatory comments about marriage instead of simply ignoring them the way she normally did. A feeling of satisfaction filled her as Conal blinked in surprise at her tart words. Obviously her response had caught him off guard. Now to try to keep him off guard.

"The problem is that my mother is determined to marry me off before I turn thirty next month," she continued slowly.

Conal grinned at her. "I can see her point. It's all downhill for a woman after thirty, while a man is just coming into his prime."

"I suggest you keep your cracks to yourself or you'll never live to see your prime!"

"To get back to my problem, the situation has gotten so bad that my mother just called to tell me that she had arranged a blind date for me for the weekend."

Conal tensed, trying to suppress the spurt of anger that suffused him at the thought of Livvy going out with another man.

"I told my mother no, and when she started to cry, I got flustered. I said I couldn't date him because I was thinking of marrying someone else, and I was bringing him home for the weekend."

Conal felt a jagged shard of some dark emotion lacerate his composure. He hadn't known that she was dating anyone, let alone considering marriage. Although he'd known from the first moment he'd seen her that sooner or later she probably would marry. Liwy was everything a man wanted in a woman, if a wife was what he wanted. Which he didn't, he reminded himself. Marriage and kids were not for him. He'd settled that question long ago. Or rather it had been settled for him, he thought grimly.

"Do I know him?" Conal was relieved to hear the even tone of his voice. He didn't dare let her know that he cared one way or the other. To do so would be to run the risk of losing what little he did have of her. If she were to start to feel uncomfortable around him, she would leave, and he wouldn't be able to see her every morning. He wouldn't ever hear that funny little gurgle of laughter she gave when something really amused her. He wouldn't have her around to listen to his ideas and offer insightful suggestions.

Livvy sighed. "There isn't anyone. I just said that to stop Mom from crying."

Conal felt himself sag as an overwhelming feeling of relief washed through him, loosening his rigid muscles. He felt as if a benevolent fate had just lifted the weight of the world off his shoulders.

"So if you would agree to come with me this weekend and pretend to be the man—" Livvy paused and then blurted out "—who has asked me to marry him, I'll postpone my vacation and do the soup presentation for you."

Conal's eyes widened as what she was saying finally registered. Liwy wanted him to spend the weekend pretending to be her fiancé? A feeling of exultation filled him. He would be able to kiss her and touch her to his heart's content, and if she objected, he could say that he was merely trying to add authenticity to his act. Since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd been trying to figure out a way to get her into bed, and now this gift from heaven had fallen into his lap. It seemed too good to be true, and that worried him. Things that seemed too good to be true usually were. He pushed his sense of pleasure aside and tried to find the fly in the ointment.

"How am I supposed to behave?" he asked cautiously.

"Just be yourself," Livvy said, beginning to relax slightly at his matter-of-fact response. "You see, my mom is always telling me that I should grab one of the rising young executive types that frequent the street corners of New York City."

"Those are not the types who frequent street corners in New York City!"

Livvy shrugged. "I know it, and you know it, but Mom is convinced it's true. Anyway, I think if she were to actually meet a high-powered executive type she wouldn't be so keen to see me married to one."

Conal chuckled. "I think I've just been insulted."

"Not really. It's just that Mom's idea of a perfect husband is a man like my father was. He worked his shift at the mine and spent his evenings and weekends at home with his family. In fact, according to Mom, the only disobliging thing he ever did was to get himself killed while she was pregnant with me," Livvy said wryly.

"I see," Conal said slowly, wondering if that was also Livvy's idea of a perfect man. Was that why she had refused all his invitations? Because she wanted a stolid, unimaginative man who never took any risks. It was a depressing thought, but he refused to dwell on it. Right now he needed to concentrate on his unexpected opportunity to show her how great they could be together. To prove to her that the factors that made them mesh so well in the office would work equally well in bed.

"It's a deal." Conal fought to keep his sense of triumph out of his voice. "I'll masquerade as your fiancé and you'll do the presentation."

"I didn't tell Mom that we were engaged, just that I was considering it," Livvy hurriedly corrected him.

"Engaged is better. It gives us more leeway. Tell me what kind of engaged couple we're supposed to be," he said before she could question what sort of leeway he meant. "Is this a Bertie Wooster type of engagement, where I call you 'old girl' and pat you on the shoulder?"

"You like Jeeves and Wooster, too?" Livvy asked, momentarily diverted.

"I bought the entire set of videos when I was in England last spring. If you do a good job on the presentation, I'll let you watch them. But to get back to our discussion. If it isn't a Bertie Wooster type of engagement, is it like one of those old Doris Day, Rock Hudson movies from the sixties? The kind where he kisses her like this."

To Livvy's dumbfounded amazement, Conal leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. The scent of his cologne was stronger that close to him, and it caused the bottom to drop out of her stomach.

To her disappointment he straightened up almost immediately and stared down into her eyes.

"Somehow that doesn't seem quite right," he said slowly.

Livvy ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip and stared into his eyes. There was a light glittering in their depths that she wished was passion but feared was simply devilment.

"I can't quite see you as Doris Day. You're more the foreign-film type of heroine."

"I am?" she asked weakly, still off balance from his unexpected kiss.

"Uh-huh. Full of unfathomable secrets and hidden purposes."

He cupped the back of her head with his large hand and pressed his lips against her mouth. His tongue darted out to lick over her bottom lip and Livvy shivered, instinctively opening her mouth. He immediately took advantage and began to explore with his tongue inside. Livvy trembled at its rough texture, and her hands came up to clutch his arms. She felt as if she needed an anchor in a world that had suddenly lost all its familiar moorings.

Her fingers slipped over the crisp cotton of his shirt, digging into the muscles below. Kissing him was turning out to be every bit as fantastic as she'd imagined it would be.

Livvy bit back her instinctive protest as he raised his head and stared down into her flushed face. Kissing him was also filled with potential pitfalls, she reminded herself. She absolutely had to keep her wits about her when she was around him. No matter how hard it was.

"I was right. You are definitely the foreign-film type," Conal murmured, and his warm breath wafted across her cheeks making the skin tighten.

Livvy stared up at him, wondering what she had let herself in for. Nothing she couldn't handle, she told herself, trying hard to believe it.

Two

Livvy tensed as the doorbell shattered the stillness in her apartment. Its normally melodious chimes suddenly seemed raucous. Nervously she ran her turquoise silk pullover down over her faded jeans. Conal was here! But that wasn't any reason to be jittery, she tried to tell herself. She had never felt nervous around him before. Exasperated, sometimes, and usually excited, but never just plain nervous.

But then she'd never been pretending to be his fiancée. The thought sent a flood of complex emotions swirling through her, the major one being anticipation.

The bell chimed again. After quickly glancing around her small living room to make sure that she hadn't inadvertently left out one of the numerous portraits of Conal in various stages of undress that she had painted over the last year and a half, Livvy hurried to open it.

The sight of Conal standing there wearing a pair of tan slacks and an Aran knit sweater momentarily left her speechless. He looked even larger in the bulky sweater than he normally did. And somehow different in casual clothes.

"Good afternoon," Livvy said, feeling awkward. Their pretend engagement had introduced a new element into their relationship. An element she didn't quite feel comfortable with yet.

"Not so far it hasn't been!" Conal stalked into her apartment.

Livvy blinked, caught off guard by his scowl. Was he regretting their masquerade already? Did he want to back out of their agreement?

"Larson stopped by the office this afternoon right after you left," Conal announced. "He brought the model he hired with him to see what you thought."

"And to think I missed a treat like that," Livvy said, relaxing slightly when she realized that Conal's ill humor was work related.

"You probably would have thought it was a treat," Conal said sourly, "since you were the one who gave him the bright idea."

"I did not! I am intellectually and morally opposed to the exploitation of the female body by a bunch of overage, drooling male adolescents!"

Conal's annoyance dissolved in the face of her outraged expression. "Very good. Did you practice that or does such slogan mongering come naturally?"

"I am not kidding," Livvy muttered. "I think it's disgraceful."

"I agree with you, but you've got the wrong end of the stick. Larson thought about what you said about finding some overmuscled male to wear a sequined jockstrap in the commercial and decided it was a great idea."

Livvy's mouth fell open, and she stared at Conal in shock. "He found a male model in a red sequined jockstrap?"

"Actually they were blue sequins," Conal said. "And I couldn't talk him out of it."

"I should hope not!" Livvy said virtuously. "Total nudity is going entirely too far."

"Where's your sense of outrage now?" Conal demanded.

"I'm looking for it."

"Well, you'd better find it before Monday morning because Larson is coming back."

Livvy grinned. "Lovely...something to look forward to. Maybe he'll bring the model with him. I've never actually seen a sequined jockstrap."

And if he had his way she never would, Conal thought on a flash of a dark, uncomfortable emotion that he very much feared was jealousy. He didn't want Livvy looking at strange men. For that matter he didn't want her looking at familiar men. At least not until he'd had a chance to thoroughly explore the emotions she seemed to so effortlessly raise in him. Explore them and dissipate them. Then he wouldn't mind what she did.

"Where's your suitcase?" Livvy suddenly realized that he hadn't brought one. A feeling of disappointment engulfed her. Had her first guess been right, after all? Had he changed his mind about pretending to be her fiancé?



"I left it in the car," he murmured, trying to decide if this would be a good time to give her the diamond he'd spent all last evening choosing or whether he should wait until they had actually arrived at her home. Now, he decided. That way if she objected he would be able to argue with her, something he couldn't do in front of her family.

He'd wanted to buy her a piece of jewelry for months now. Something like a diamond pendant. On a long gold chain so that the diamond would nestle between her breasts. Her bare breasts. He swallowed at the tantalizing image that popped into his mind. Later, he told himself. When they were actually lovers, he would buy her what he wanted. But for now he would have to be satisfied with giving her what he could make a good case for her accepting.

Conal pulled the small black leather box out of his pant's pocket and shoved it at her.

"Here," he said. "To help the impersonation."

Livvy stared at the box as a feeling of longing, heavily tinged with sadness, slipped through her. It had to be an engagement ring. An engagement ring she wanted so desperately to be real. A ring she wanted to mean something to him. To be a promise from him for a future together.

Livvy took the box and slowly opened it. A gasp escaped her as the huge diamond caught the sunlight pouring in through the window and splintered it into a million fragments of rainbow-colored light. The ring was absolutely gorgeous in its simplicity. A single stone set in a plain gold band. It practically shouted good taste and...the money to indulge it, she realized. Anything that beautifully cut, to say nothing of that big, had to have cost a fortune. She couldn't accept it. Even temporarily. No matter how much she wanted to. It was far too valuable.

"If you don't like it—"

"It's the most gorgeous ring that I've ever seen," she said truthfully.

"Then what's the problem?"

"What if I lost it?" she asked.

"I'd collect from my insurance company. It's just a ring I bought a few years ago and then didn't need," he lied. Somehow, it was very important to him that she accept that ring. Accept it and wear it.

"A few years ago?" Livvy tried to swallow the metallic taste of anger that unexpectedly coated her mouth. Why had he been so willing to marry some other woman then and yet he was now vocally opposed to marriage?

"Uh-huh. There was this gorgeous blonde..." Conal tried to lull her suspicions.

"Why is it always a blonde?" Livvy snapped, not wanting to hear about the woman who had almost tempted Conal into marriage despite his clear aversion to the state. Or had it been the blonde who had soured him on marriage?

"It isn't always a blonde," Conal assured her. "There was a redhead named Cindy, who—"

"That was a rhetorical question," she cut him off. "Not a request for a list of your conquests."

Conal grinned ruefully. "I think I was Cindy's conquest if you want the truth. But fascinating as you appear to find my past love life, we need to get going. According to the rental agent, it'll take us a good three hours to get to Scranton at this time of day."

"A bad three hours. The traffic is always miserable." Livvy stalled, suddenly overwhelmed by last-minute doubts about the wisdom of changing the status quo. She had the strangest feeling that once she put on Conal's ring nothing would ever be the same again, and she was afraid. She might find her hopeless love for Conal emotionally frustrating, but she could handle it. Once she got a taste of what it was like to be physically close to him, could she handle the deprivation which would fill her when they returned to New York and he slipped back into his old role as her boss?

"Sorry, what am I thinking of? I almost forgot."

Livvy looked up at Conal, wondering what he was talking about. She wasn't left wondering for long. He grabbed her and pulled her up against his chest. His arms tightened around her, squashing her against him. A hot, tingling sensation sizzled through her breasts leaving them achy. She wanted

nothing more than to close her eyes and savor the sensation. Instead, she forced herself to focus on what he'd said.

"Forgot what?" she mumbled into his sweater.

"That we're supposed to be an engaged couple. Engaged couples kiss."

Engaged couples do lots of things, Livvy thought longingly, as a sudden image of Conal's broad, bare shoulders filled her mind.

Livvy fought against the desire that was eating at her composure and tried to think. It was hopeless. The only thing she could think about was what it felt like to be pressed up against him. Even better than she'd thought it would.

She peered up into his eyes. There were tiny sparks glowing deep in them. Like minuscule explosions of passion were being set off just below the surface. But was it really passion? And if it was, was his passion directed at her personally or was it simply the result of him holding a woman, and any woman would have produced the same results?

The question lost some of its urgency as she watched his head come closer. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at his firm lips. They looked so enticing. So alluring. She wanted to taste them and explore the exact shape and texture of them.

Her eyelids were becoming heavy, weighted down by her growing need. It was all she could do not to grab his head and yank him down to her. Finally when she was ready to scream with frustration, his lips brushed hers and a shower of reaction drenched her. Goose bumps popped up on her arms, and shivers chased after them. To her massive disappointment Conal made no effort to deepen their kiss. Instead, he raised his head, staring down at her, his expression unreadable.

What was he thinking? Unease began to nudge aside the pleasure Livvy felt. Had he found their kiss a disappointment? Chagrin drove the last lingering shreds of desire from her mind. The thought that Conal might find her deficient in the area of lovemaking made her feel confused and uncertain. Her relationship with him to date might not have developed along the lines she'd wanted, but at least it had been fairly clear and uncomplicated. It hadn't reduced her to this present dithering mass of uncertainty.

Livvy watched as Conal took her hand and gently pushed the ring over her finger. It was a perfect fit. An omen? All it signified was that the girlfriend that Conal had bought it for had the same size hands she did. She mentally chided herself. The idea that she was nothing more than one of an interchangeable line of women moving through his life infuriated her.

"Thanks," she snapped, and turned to her suitcase, which was sitting open on the sofa.

Conal frowned slightly at her clipped tone, wondering if it was the ring she objected to or if the problem was with the man who had placed it on her finger. Or could it simply be that she was nervous about the coming weekend? He didn't know. There was so much he didn't know, he thought uneasily. Starting with how to act around her family. His experience with families was limited to visits to his married friends and what he'd seen on television. He wasn't so naive as to believe that sitcom characters represented reality. At least he sure hoped not.

Concentrate on what you can do and don't worry about what you can't, Conal reminded himself of the motto he'd shaped his life around. He had finally managed to breach Livvy's seemingly impenetrable professional shield. Or rather, her mother had breached it for him. But whatever the reason, he now had the opportunity to get to know Livvy on a personal basis.

Conal swallowed as his body clenched beneath the onslaught of images he had of just how personally he would like to get to know her. He wanted so much to take her in his arms again. To nuzzle the velvety skin of her cheek. To run his lips down over the soft flesh of her neck. To explore the precise texture of her breasts. To... He took a deep, steadying breath. For so long he'd felt starved for the taste and feel of her, but strangely enough, the brief kisses they'd shared had only made his hunger worse. Before, he'd only had his imaginings; now, he knew exactly what it felt like to have her in his arms and he wanted more. Lots more.

Conal totally lost his train of thought as Livvy bent over to close her suitcase and the well-worn jeans tightened over her hips. His eyes narrowed as he savored the sight. She had the most fantastic shape, slim and yet femininely rounded. The only way she could look any better would be if she were naked. He gulped as he felt sweat pop out on his forehead.

You're in a bad way, Sutherland, he told himself. You need a woman. No, he corrected himself. He didn't need a woman; he needed Livvy Farrell and he needed her very badly. He was getting damn sick and tired of spending hours every evening trying to work off his frustrations in the gym.

The snick of Livvy's suitcase locking echoed loudly in the still apartment, cutting through his thoughts.

"Is that all you're taking?" He gestured toward the case.

"That and five dozen bagels."

Conal blinked. "Five dozen bagels?" he repeated. "What are you going to do with five dozen bagels?"

Livvy grinned at him. "At the risk of appearing obvious, I'm going to eat them. Or rather, my mother is going to serve them at the buffet dinner this evening. Mom swears that only a real New Yorker can make a proper bagel."

"She's right. You get the bagels, and I'll bring the suitcase."

Livvy grabbed the bagel sack off her kitchen counter, checked once more to make sure that everything was turned off and hurried after Conal who was carrying her heavy suitcase as if it weighted no more than a few pounds.

She stole a furtive glance at his upper arm. Just how strong was he? she wondered. He'd played professional football until two years ago when he'd retired and opened the ad agency. Football players were supposed to be very strong.

Maybe she would have a chance to explore the exact state of his musculature over the weekend. A shiver of anticipation danced over her skin. The possibilities seemed endless.

To Livvy's surprise, Conal was a competent driver who showed an amazing patience for the idiosyncrasies of the other drivers on the road. Apparently he had escaped the macho speed syndrome that had infected so many of the men she'd dated over the years.

"Now where?" Conal asked her, once they had left the expressway in Scranton.

"Turn right at the light and go straight for a while."

"Interesting place." Conal glanced curiously at the old houses that lined the hilly streets. "Did you grow up here?"

"Uh-huh. My family has been in the Scranton area for a hundred and fifty years. Before that, they starved in Ireland.

"Turn right at the next light," she said absently, as she tried to decide what she should tell him about her family. Should she warn him about potential conversation pitfalls like mentioning the health hazards of smoking to her great-uncle Harry, or politics to her aunt Rose, or tax audits to her grandfather, or the state of the public school system to her cousin Henry? It seemed kind of unfair to let Conal meet her family with the assumption that they were all rational adults who would respond to seemingly innocuous conversational gambits politely.

Livvy shifted in the rental car's soft leather seat, feeling guilty at what she was letting Conal in for. He probably came from a nice, normal family whose members were all polite to guests no matter what the provocation. Not that she knew much about his family background. In fact... Livvy frowned as she searched her memory, she knew almost nothing about Conal's background, period. Just that he'd played pro football and worked in the advertising business in the off-season until an injury to his knee had forced his retirement. That and the fact that he'd wanted to belong to a big family when he'd been a kid.

Her feeling of unease grew the more she thought about it. Why hadn't Conal ever mentioned his family to her? Because he didn't believe in mixing his work life with his personal life, and he didn't

foresee her, or really any woman, ever occupying a meaningful niche in his personal life? Strangely enough, the thought made her feel slightly more optimistic. Conal had absolutely no idea that she harbored long-range plans where he was concerned. No idea that she wanted a whole lot more than just a weekend from him. And since he didn't know he wouldn't be on guard. If she were lucky, she might be able to slip underneath his defenses before he realized what had happened. If she were very lucky, she might also find out why he seemed to have ruled out a wife and children for himself.

She glanced sideways at Conal, her eyes lingering on the strong line of his square-cut jaw. Slipping under Conal would be a distinct pleasure. Livvy shifted restlessly as the memory of his lips pressing against hers sent a burning sensation over her nerve endings.

Even though she didn't begin to understand it, kissing Conal was far more than she'd ever believed a simple kiss could be. Far more than her previous experiences would have led her to believe was possible. Which made her wonder what making love to him would be like. Her breathing developed an uneven cadence.

"Turn left at the next corner." Livvy gamely tried to redirect her thoughts toward something harmless. "My mother lives at the top of the hill in the yellow house on the right. The one with the car with the Maryland license plates on it, parked in front," she added slowly. Had her uncle David and his family come, after all?

Conal shot her a quick glance as he deftly parked. "What's the matter?"

"Matter? Why should anything be the matter?"

"I asked first. Tell me—after driving all this way, are we just going to sit in the car? I promise not to do anything too unsociable."

The note of uncertainty she heard in his voice surprised her. Could Conal be nervous? He always seemed to be so in control of himself and the situations he found himself in. That he might have a few insecurities himself had never occurred to her before. And she wished it hadn't now, she admitted. She had enough to worry about without worrying about Conal, too.

"I don't know whether you consider it a plus or a minus, but in my family, not doing anything unsociable would probably make you unique," Livvy said.

To her shock, Conal responded by suddenly grabbing her and tugging her across the car seat toward him. She landed awkwardly, her breasts squashing into his chest. A torrent of sensation slammed through her, bringing her emotions clamoring to life.

"What are you doing?" Livvy mumbled, knowing the question was ridiculous, but using it to gain some time to deal with the feelings he so effortlessly raised in her.

"Getting into the role of a besottedly engaged man," he told her. "And what better way than to kiss the object of my affections."

Livvy stared into his eyes. He had such gorgeous eyes, she thought distractedly. Dark and velvety with thick brown lashes. She felt as if she could drown in them. As if—Her thoughts scattered as he leaned closer, and his lips captured hers.

They were warm and firm, and they pressed insistently against hers. Livvy shivered violently as his tongue traced over her full lips, and she mindlessly opened her mouth welcoming his deepening of their kiss. His tongue moved over hers and a tiny moan bubbled out of her throat to be swallowed up by Conal.

"I'm beginning to feel engaged," he muttered against her tingling lips. "But not quite."

"Unfortunately for my mood enhancement, someone is staring at us from the house next door," he added.

Livvy turned her head, following Conal's glance. There was a scruffy-looking young man peering at them, a peeved expression on his face. The neighbor's husband's second cousin's son? If so, she was doubly grateful not to have to dodge him all weekend.

"My rival?" Conal casually leaned over and brushed his lips across her cheekbone. Livvy's reaction was not so casual. Heat from his lips seeped into her skin, warming it and making her wish

they were anywhere but in a car in plain sight of anyone who cared to look. But then, the only reason he was kissing her was precisely because they were in plain sight of everyone, she reminded herself.

Determinedly she scooted away from Conal and reached for the door handle. "Let's go inside before Mom comes out and we have the whole street watching the introductions."

Livvy climbed out of the car and waited for Conal to reach her before she started up the front walk. She let out a squeak and spun around when she felt a gentle pinch on her rear.

"Conal Sutherland!"

Conal gave her an impossibly innocent look. "Engaged couples don't do that?"

"This engaged couple doesn't do that."

"That's not quite accurate, since I just did," he said. "Perhaps you should say that your half of this engaged couple doesn't do that."

"Darling, come in. I've been waiting all afternoon for you." Marie's welcoming voice called to Livvy from the open door.

Livvy glanced over her shoulder and hissed at Conal, "Behave yourself," as she hurried through the front door, giving her mother a warm hug.

"Darling, you look wonderful and this must be..." Marie stared past her at Conal.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Conal Sutherland. He's—"

"Darling!" Marie shrieked as she caught sight of the engagement ring Livvy was wearing. "You said yes!"

Livvy winced at the ecstatic note in her mother's voice.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Conal. You can call me Marie." She dimpled happily at him. "That's what my other son-in-law calls me."

"Marie," Conal obediently repeated.

A high-pitched shriek followed by a thud echoed down the stairwell from the second floor, and Marie glanced nervously at the ceiling as the chandelier swayed. "Oh, dear," she murmured.

Livvy blinked as a second thud followed the first.

"It doesn't sound as if they're taking prisoners up there," Conal offered.

Livvy jumped as yet a still-louder thump sounded. "Um, Mom, do you think we ought to see what happened?"

Marie vigorously shook her head. "I'm quite sure I don't want to know. It's your cousin Mark. Your uncle David sent him upstairs and told him to stay there until he decided to behave."

"They won't be here that long," Livvy muttered. "I thought Uncle David said they couldn't come?"

"He did!" Marie whispered confidentially. "They simply appeared an hour ago saying that they found they were able to make it after all. And I can't find anyplace for them to stay. I've called every single one of our relatives, and they all said they haven't got one spare bed."

Livvy grimaced. "Do you blame them? Those kids of theirs are completely out of control. Why don't you send them to a hotel?"

Marie looked shocked. "Darling, I can't do that. They're family. I love David and Sarah."

"I love them, too, but I've found my feelings for them increase the farther I am from their kids."

"Shh," Marie muttered. "They'll hear you. Come on."

"Fascinating," Conal murmured as they followed Marie into the living room. Livvy wondered whether he was referring to the continuing noise from upstairs or her mother. Either one was probably outside his experience.

"Welcome to the family!" Her uncle David cheerfully wrung Conal's hand. "I don't have to tell you you're getting a girl in a million with Livvy."

"We're so glad to meet you, Conal," Sarah gushed. "My daughters will be so excited. You will let them be your bridesmaids won't you, Livvy?"

"Um, I haven't gotten to the planning stage yet," Livvy stalled.

“Take my advice, Conal, and elope,” David said.

“Livvy, darling,” Marie said, “would you help me a minute in the kitchen?”

“Come on, Conal,” Livvy said, unwilling to leave him alone with her relatives. David would probably launch into one of his incredibly boring fishing stories.

“Darling, I hate to ask this of you,” Marie said the minute the kitchen door was safely closed behind them, “but I can’t think of what else to do. Would you and Conal mind dreadfully spending the weekend at your sister’s? Fern flatly refused to take any of David’s kids. She said she still hasn’t gotten the grape-juice stains out of her carpet from the last time they were there.” Marie shook her head. “And Fern a teacher, too. You’d think she could know how to handle them.”

“With a whip and chair,” Livvy muttered, but her mother ignored her.

“But she said she’d love to have you and Conal,” Marie said.

“We would be happy to stay at Fern’s,” Conal promptly said, and Marie gave him a grateful smile.

“You’re so kind,” Marie said.

Kind? Livvy examined her mother’s description and found that it was true. Conal was kind. Not the cloying, patronizing variety of kind, but the bracing, practical type.

“You’ll just have time to get over to Fern’s and unpack before it’s time to go to Olivia’s for dinner. And for heaven’s sake don’t be late,” Marie warned. “Olivia is already mad that Mom and Dad won’t be there tonight. She seems to think that it’s my fault that Dad’s doctor said he had to rest tonight if he was going to have the whole family out to the farm tomorrow. And make sure you take the bagels with you. You did remember them, didn’t you?”

At Livvy’s nod, Marie stood on tiptoe and gave Conal a kiss on his cheek before she enveloped Livvy in a hug. “I can hardly wait to show off my soon-to-be son-in-law. I hope you aren’t going to have a long engagement, dear?”

“It couldn’t be too short as far as I’m concerned,” Conal said, and Livvy winced at the laughter she could hear coloring his voice. As usual her mother was oblivious to nuances.

“Wonderful!” Marie clapped her hands together in pleasure. “I’ve always loved Christmas weddings.”

“Or Thanksgiving,” Conal added.

Livvy gave him a quelling glare as she dragged him toward the back door. Playing a part was one thing, hamming it up quite another.

Three

“There, that’s Fern’s place.” Livvy pointed to a small yellow cottage with blue shutters wedged in between two much bigger houses. “Her new color combination looks nice,” she added.

Conal pulled up in front of Fern’s house, cut the engine and took a good look at it. It didn’t look nice, he mentally corrected Liwy’s assessment. It looked fantastic. Like the stuff dreams were made of. His to be precise. As a child he’d dreamed about living in a house very much like Fern’s. One with shutters on the windows, dormers on the second floor and a wide porch across the front with a swing on it. Most of the other kids in the home had fantasized about suddenly discovering that they belonged to parents who were sports heros or movie stars who took them away to live in a mansion. But he never had. His dreams had been much more prosaic. He’d just wanted a father and a mother and a small house where he could sit on the porch on rainy summer afternoons and play.

Conal’s eyes drifted to Livvy. Livvy would fit right into a house like that. In the master bedroom. He felt anticipation spiral through him, nibbling at his composure. A master bedroom with a king-size bed, and he would spend his long, rainy afternoons playing in it with Livvy. He would take her in his arms and smother her lovely face with kisses and then he would work his way downward, over her elegant neck to the enticing hollow at the base of her throat. The skin on his body prickled as he anticipated the pleasure of slowly, leisurely undressing her to reveal her delectable body.



He grabbed his imagination by the throat and throttled it, when he realized that his fingers were trembling with the force of his desire. Think of this as an ad campaign, he encouraged himself. You're trying to sell a product, yourself. You have to convince Livvy that you would make the most perfect lover she could ever hope to find.

He stifled a sigh. The problem with that was that he didn't know what characteristics she wanted in a lover. And he wasn't sure how to find out without asking, and that was far too dangerous. Once he'd verbalized his desire for her, the words could never be recalled. They would hang between them. They could well poison their present relationship, which, while emotionally frustrating at times, was a whole lot better than nothing. And that was what he would have if she were to leave. As talented as she was, she could get a job at any one of a dozen advertising agencies tomorrow.

Uncertainly Livvy studied Conal's set expression out of the corner of her eye, wondering what he was thinking about. Certainly not the effectiveness of her sister's color scheme. Was he trying to figure out how to escape back to New York? Had her mother's embarrassing eagerness to welcome him to the family scared him off? Probably not. She relaxed ever so slightly as she studied the determined jut of his chin. It would take far more than her mother to scare Conal Sutherland.

Besides, even if Conal was having second thoughts, they had a deal, she reminded herself. Conal would honor it. And he would get fair value for his impersonation. She was going to do his soup campaign. She shivered as her eyes strayed to his firm lips, like a magnet that was perpetually drawn to true north. She longed to feel them against hers again. She wanted...

Livvy blinked as his face came closer, filling her line of vision. It was as if her intense longing had actually pulled him to her. Nervously she licked her lower lip, afraid to say anything for fear of disturbing whatever he intended to do. Her breath caught in her throat as he came closer. Close enough to brush his lips gently over hers. A tingling sensation shot through her.

Conal felt so good, and he tasted even better, she thought dreamily. She wanted more, much more. She wanted to grab his head and hold him still while she pressed her tongue against his lips. She wanted to run her fingers through his hair and find out if it was as silky as it looked.

She was jolted back to reality with a thump when Conal raised his head and whispered, "There, that should be enough to convince anyone watching that we're an engaged couple."

No, it wasn't, Livvy wanted to say. It takes much more than that. She sighed longingly.

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